

Equality in workplace

Can business schools propel women to the C-suite?

Academics try to crack the problem of gender balance and leadership

Nancy Rothbard recalls an incident that epitomises the problems facing women at work. In a meeting, she was asked a question directly by another member of the group but, before she could speak, five male participants jumped into the conversation.

“I was politely raising my hand and no one was stopping to let me in,” she says. “I finally bulldozed over someone.”

This is only one small, mundane example of gender bias, she adds. But what is significant is that Prof Rothbard is a senior female professor at Wharton, one of the US business schools that has long prided itself on its programmes and scholarships to help women reach senior positions. If gender bias can happen here, it can happen anywhere.

There is still a paucity of women at the top of corporate life. In the US, women hold 23 of the Fortune 500 chief executive roles and only 14 of Europe’s largest 350 groups have female chief executives. In the UK, a government-backed review last week recommended that FTSE 100 companies ensure a third of their executive positions are held by women by 2020.

But business schools are divided and often unsure about the best way in the workplace and in the classroom to tackle the problem.

For the past decade, they have encouraged women to study on degree programmes, particularly MBAs, but progress has been slow. This year, 35 per cent of MBA students in the Financial Times’s ranked schools were women, compared with 29 per cent a decade ago.



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Some say the classroom experience is part of the problem. Professors have to eliminate “invisible woman syndrome”, in which women are overlooked in discussions, says Ashleigh Rosette, an associate professor at the Fuqua school at Duke University in the US. Career services must also play a part.

“When placing women in jobs, how do we get women on the right trajectory? Some jobs lead to the C-suite, others do not.” So far, there is little evidence that an MBA helps a woman to the top job.

Financial Times research published this year showed that, of the 95 chief executives of the FT 500 that hold an MBA from one of the FT’s ranked schools, only four are women.

Some believe MBA students are not experienced enough to recognise the problem. At London Business School, Raina Brands, who studies gender bias in organisations through the lens of social networks, points out that women often first encounter

sexism when they move into a leadership role from a competence-based job, usually after an MBA. “It’s not subtle at all,” she says.

Ilian Mihov, dean of Insead business school in France, argues that attitudes are changing and that younger adults are more aware of sexism than previous generations. He gives the example of a meeting with the incoming MBA class in January this year. The first question, from a male student, was why there were no female professors teaching on the five core courses.

“Twenty years ago no one would have asked that question,” he says.

This is corroborated by Inês Relvas, who runs the Women in Business networking club at Insead. She says that between 30 and 40 per cent of attendees at the club’s events are men.

But many inside and outside business schools believe the corporate landscape is not changing quickly enough. To counter this,

business schools such as Wharton and Harvard Business School in the US, the Saïd Business School at Oxford in the UK and Ceibs in China, run leadership programmes specifically for women at senior levels.

At LBS, Prof Brands is a supporter of women-only programmes. “They are valuable for a couple of reasons,” she says. “They give women a framework for what they are facing, which is very useful. Also they help in formalising strategies for addressing gender bias in the workplace.”

But it is in the workplace that gender-specific programmes have met resistance, says Prof Rothbard, who became the first woman to lead the management department at Wharton in July this year.

“I have had women who have fought to come to the women’s executive programme,” she says, adding corporate bosses will encourage female employees to enrol on general leadership programmes but not those only for women.

Frances Frei, the first woman to lead the executive education division at HBS, agrees that “there is room for a bit of gender-specific learning”.

Behind the numbers there are many subtleties. “It’s not a pipeline issue, that’s nonsense,” says Prof Frei. “It’s unintentional acts that end up with unequal access. It’s people at a loss about what to do so they keep doing what works for them. What we have are unintended obstacles.”

Prof Brands reaches similar conclusions. “At the highest levels of organisations, leaders experience uncertainty, so relationships need to be comfortable,” she says. That is why people recruit colleagues similar to themselves. “It’s not a conscious decision [by the boss] that ‘I want

another white man here’.”

These subtle workplace culture factors are a “late-comer” to the debate, says Jill Armstrong, postdoctoral researcher at Murray Edwards College, one of the women-only colleges at the University of Cambridge in the UK.

“Men generally think that gender equality is a done deal,” she says. “They are only just realising that they have a role to play in this.”

She recently led a research project involving 40 men in UK companies. The conclusion was that small changes in behaviour will have a big effect. One recommendation was weekly networking events in which everyone had to talk to someone new of the opposite gender.

“Women’s enthusiasm and ambition fall off after two years in the workplace,” she says. “It’s the little things that happen to you, like being interrupted. All these things add up to frustration.”

Kathy Harvey, associate dean at Saïd Business School at Oxford university, argues that there is still little known about how women succeed. “In terms of what interventions matter ... there’s a lot of work to be done.”

In any case, she says, working lives and organisations are changing fast: “Both men and women can see they are going to [have to] navigate their way through much more complex hierarchies than 20 or 30 years ago.”

As for Prof Rothbard, in spite of all the setbacks, she is optimistic. “It [gender bias] is depressingly ongoing. But I am hopeful.”

As to her ill-fated faculty meeting at Wharton? “I just ended up laughing,” she says.

Growing cohorts: The view from China

Jean Lee, director of the Leadership Behavioural Laboratory at Ceibs in Shanghai, says she has seen a change in the attitude of women over the past decade. On the school’s MBA programme, 37 per cent of students are women. On the Executive MBA for working managers, the figure has risen to close to 30 per cent from about 8 per cent 10 years ago.

But although women increasingly opt for business education, their careers are often different from those pursued by women in the US or Europe.

In large companies, diversity is not a priority. “It’s the business issues that are the driving force — internationalisation, for example,” says Prof Lee.

As a result, many younger women who want to be entrepreneurs attend the women’s leadership programme at Ceibs. Yet the aspiration to run a business is often in conflict with traditional social requirements, in which women are expected to be in charge of the home and family.

“The social role of women is still quite traditional,” says Prof Lee.